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Capitalist Society, Second Edition

Bertell Ollman

Excerpt

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PART I

*Philosophical introduction*

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## 1. *With words that appear like bats*

### I

The most formidable hurdle facing all readers of Marx is his 'peculiar' use of words. Vilfredo Pareto provides us with the classic statement of this problem when he asserts that Marx's words are like bats: one can see in them both birds and mice.<sup>1</sup> No more profound observation has ever been offered on our subject. Thinkers through the years have noticed how hard it is to pin Marx down to particular meanings, and have generally treated their non-comprehension as a criticism. Yet, without a firm knowledge of what Marx is trying to convey with his terms, one cannot properly grasp any of his theories.

How, for example, are we to understand the startling claim that 'Value is labor' (my emphasis), or Marx's assertion that the 'identity of consumption and production . . . appears to be a threefold one', or his allusion to theory which under certain circumstances becomes a 'material force'?<sup>2</sup> Marx's statements frequently jar us, and instances of obscurity in his work, occasions where two or more interpretations seem equally applicable, are more numerous still.

Engels was well aware of the trouble people had in coming to grips with Marx's terminology. In his Preface to the English edition of *Capital* 1, he says, 'there is, however, one difficulty we could not spare the reader: the use of certain terms in a sense different from what they have, not only in common life, but in ordinary political economy.' But, according to Engels,

this was unavoidable. Every new aspect of a science involves a revolution in the technical terms of that science . . . Political economy has generally been content to take, just as they were, the terms of commercial and industrial life, and to operate with them, entirely failing to see that by so doing, it confined itself within the narrow circle of ideas expressed by those terms . . . It is, however, self-evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon that form of production as imperishable and final.<sup>3</sup>

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Whether the necessity which forced Marx to adopt his peculiar use of language is 'self-evident', as Engels claims, is open to question, but to question it now would be to depart from my chosen inquiry. What Engels is saying is that words express the understanding of a period and as this understanding progresses these words and/or their meanings must give way to new ones. To use only terms that are current or only the accepted meanings of such terms is to confine oneself to expressing ideas which are also current. In Marx's case, viewing capitalism as a passing phase is said to demand different concepts from those used by people who consider capitalism to be the eternal mode of production.

Eight years later, in his Introduction to *Capital* III (after a considerable volume of misinterpretation had passed under the bridge), Engels returns to this subject, mentioning yet another difficulty in Marx's use of words. It seems that Marx's terminology, besides being new and unusual, is also inconsistent, the same word meaning different things at different times. Rather than seeing this as a fault, Engels proclaims it a virtue, and says this was necessary to express Marx's understanding of the society he describes. Engels argues that we should not expect to find

fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works. It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived, not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise subject to change and transformation, and they are not encapsulated in rigid definitions, but are developed in their historical or logical process of formulation.<sup>4</sup>

According to Engels then, Marx's words are meant to express a conception of 'things and their interrelations . . . not as fixed, but as changing', and, consequently, the definitions of these words must also change.

It is tempting at this point to call a halt to the 'jargon', and declare Engels and Marx with him confused and incapable of full clarification. There is a tradition in the English speaking world going at least as far back as George Bernard Shaw which warns readers of Marx to 'never mind the metaphysics' and blames his slight exaggerations or gaping errors, depending on the critic's political complexion, on his 'animistic philosophy'.<sup>5</sup> Another more difficult path to follow is the one which leads from Marx's terminology to the picture of the world he was trying to convey. Engels'

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comments have not solved the mystery, but they point the direction in which research must proceed. In Marx's conception of social reality lies the solution to the riddle which some readers have discovered in his terminology.

With few exceptions, Marx's critics have avoided any serious investigation of his conception of social reality. This has not relieved them, however, of the necessity of having a position on this subject, of making an assumption about the way in which Marx views the world and, consequently, of believing (generally without ever making it explicit) that whatever he knows is of a certain character. In so doing, whether aware of it or not, they are prescribing the real limits to what he could be saying; Marx's terms are forced into the mold of what they must mean, given this view of the world. Consequently, to launch directly into a discussion of Marx's theories, in so far as one is not content simply to repeat his expressions, is almost invariably to adopt by default ordinary language criteria for deciding on his meaning. It is to assume that what we take to be 'common sense' is an adequate foundation on which to build an understanding of Marxism, that there is no fundamental difference between his conception of social reality and our own.\* Engels has already said enough to indicate the dangers in making this assumption, but I should also like to show its influence on at least one standard interpretation of Marx's theories. By this means, too, I hope to justify the amount of time devoted to epistemological inquiry in the coming chapters.

## II

Perhaps nothing Marx ever said has been more frequently echoed than the claim that 'The mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual life process in general.'<sup>6</sup> This is declared true not only of the present but 'across' time, such that any major development in the mode of production brings about changes in these other sectors as well. So much every student

\* Common sense is all that strikes us as being obviously true, such that to deny any part of it appears, at first sight, to involve us in speaking nonsense. In this work, I shall use 'common sense' as well to refer to that body of generally unquestioned knowledge and the equally unquestioned approach to knowledge which is common to the vast majority of scholars and laymen in Western capitalist societies.

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of Marxism knows. The questions which remain to be answered are – what exactly is included in the mode of production, and in what sense is it said to determine these other factors? Or, we may ask, how is Marx using the expressions ‘mode of production’ and ‘determine’?

John Plamenatz offers a concise statement of the most widespread interpretation of Marx's claim which he formulates as a series of ‘Fundamentalist’ assumptions. According to Plamenatz, Marx's view

assumes in the first place, that men's activities recorded by the historian have been properly classified, that they have been divided into a number of mutually exclusive classes or ‘factors’. It assumes, in the second place, that the activities called fundamental change their character more or less independently of the others. And, lastly, it assumes that changes in the character of the activities called fundamental produce, directly or indirectly, corresponding changes in the characters of all the other activities.<sup>7</sup>

On this interpretation, Marxism offers an easy target for criticism on each of these three counts. To begin with, Marx did not succeed in dividing the social reality with which he was concerned into ‘a number of mutually exclusive classes or “factors”’. Thus ‘ideology’, for example, refers at times to all ideas, sometimes to normative and other ideas which are considered unscientific, and sometimes to such ideas only in so far as they serve the interests of a class. Using a still sharper knife, Georges Gurvitch claims to have found thirteen meanings of ‘ideology’ in Marx's writings, and is able to provide supporting evidence.<sup>8</sup> Differences of an equal magnitude can be found in Marx's use of ‘class’ and of many other important concepts.<sup>9</sup>

But if Marx often uses the same expression to refer to different things, he is equally capable of using different expressions to refer to what appears to be the same thing. In the passage in his Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* where he speaks of the mode of production determining ‘the social, political, and intellectual life process in general’, the same role is attributed to ‘relations of production’, ‘forces of production’, ‘economic structure of society’, ‘social existence’ and the ‘economic foundation’.<sup>10</sup> Not only do these expressions have different referents (in the case of ‘social existence’ the contrast would seem to be considerable), but some

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of them appear to include in their meaning part of the reality which Marx says they 'determine'. Thus, property relations as a system of legal claims comes under the heading of superstructure, but they are also a component of the relations of production which 'determines' this superstructure. The same difficulty arises with class struggle, which constitutes part of the political life of society while also being an element in the economic structure that is said to 'determine' political life. Such inconsistency and sloppy conceptualization (if that is what it is) has come under heavy critical fire.<sup>11</sup>

If we accept that Marx's theory requires a separable determining factor carefully distinguished from what it is supposed to determine, we arrive by a process of elimination at productive technology, not because it satisfies all the conditions but because it does so better than other possible factors. What is popularly known as 'economic determinism' becomes on this interpretation technological determinism, and it is in this manner that Plamenatz, Popper, Bober, Carew-Hunt and Acton – to name some of the more prominent representatives of this school – have understood Marxism.<sup>12</sup> The sustaining model for their interpretation is supplied by Marx's claim that 'The hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist.'<sup>13</sup>

Having reduced 'economic structure' and 'relations of production' to technology, the second basic assumption of Marxism – treated as 'Fundamentalism' – can hardly stand careful examination. Can the technology of any society 'change its character more or less independently' of the social, economic and political factors it is supposed to determine? It does not require a profound knowledge of history to see that technological development is invariably a function of the level of science, the laws of a country, the policies of a regime, consumer demand and much else. Thus, technology is *obviously* dependent in numerous important ways on the character and changes occurring in those areas of life which it is supposed to determine, something that the Fundamentalist model rules out as impossible. In levelling this kind of criticism against Marxism then, the claim is not simply that Marx is wrong but that he is ignorant of the elementary facts of social life. Nothing less – except, perhaps, dishonesty in the service of his political aims – can account for such gross misrepresentation.

The third basic assumption of Marxism, according to this inter-

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pretation, that development in technology produces corresponding changes in all other activities and institutions, is equally open to question. Again it is not necessary to probe very deeply into history to remark that Christianity and Roman Law, to mention only the most obvious instances, have outlasted the productive technology which is said to be responsible for their appearance. Yet, taken together, these three criticisms – that the elements in Marx's system are inconsistently defined, that what is called the economic factor is vitally affected by the factors it is supposed to determine and that changes in the 'superstructure' do not automatically follow upon developments in the 'base' – make up the great bulk of the attacks levelled against Marx's materialist conception of history.

Having made such criticisms, most of the same commentators readily admit that in his concrete political and economic studies Marx is guilty of none of the errors prefigured in the second and third assumptions of his 'Fundamentalist' theory.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, when dealing with real situations, Marx does not offer the development of technology or any other version of the economic factor as self-generating, but as the result of a cluster of factors coming from every walk of life and from every level of social analysis. Likewise, when concerned with actual events, Marx does not treat political and cultural progress as an automatic response to changes in technology; his explanation is invariably complex, and it is not always economic factors which play the leading role. However, the conclusion which is most often reached is that he is inconsistent, or that he does not know how to use his theories – in short, that Marx is a bad Marxist. Popper has even suggested that Marx does not always take his system seriously.<sup>15</sup>

## III

An alternative conclusion is that this interpretation of Marxism as 'Fundamentalism' drawn exclusively from general theoretical statements is erroneous. In order to take this stand, however, it must be possible to interpret Marx's theoretical claims in a manner which is compatible with the kind of social interaction that characterizes his description of real events. In other words, when Marx says 'The mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual process in general', we must try to understand this

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claim in a way that allows the latter group of factors to vitally affect the mode of production, and in a way that removes the automatic dependence of the social superstructure on the economic base. We must do this, because this is how Marx used his theories in practise. Engels advised a correspondent who had asked about Marx's materialist conception of history to read *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as a practical case of Marx's use of this theory.<sup>16</sup> This elementary suggestion has seldom been followed.

Likewise, numerous statements by the elderly Engels on the role of non-economic factors are generally written off as attempts to extricate himself from an untenable position. For example, he calls it a fatuous notion 'that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them an effect upon history'.<sup>17</sup>

In this light, 'Economic Determinism', an expression Marx himself never applied to his ideas, appears to be a caricature foisted upon Marxism by readers who misread his general claims. And if 'Economic Determinism' is a caricature, then so are 'Historical Materialism' and 'Dialectical Materialism', other popular labels for his views that have not originated with Marx. Essentially, these are limiting expressions which tend to foreclose on what Marx is saying before he has said it, restricting before research is done the number of possibilities inherent in any historical situation. As caricatures, they vary widely and always indicate the writer's specific limitations in coming to grips with the complex reality presented in Marx's works. Engels, particularly in correspondence after Marx's death, does mention 'Historical Materialism', though he usually sets it between quotation marks; it is, after all, someone else's expression.<sup>18</sup> Like Marx, he prefers to speak of 'the materialist conception of history', a much looser construction or, quite simply, 'our view of history'.<sup>19</sup>

I do not believe that thinkers of stature are never inconsistent or incapable of putting their theories to work. But when such a thinker is shown, practically at every turn, to have strayed from his general conception, there is every likelihood that it is we who have misinterpreted him. In political theory, a case which is too well made is often no case at all against the real views of our opponent. The difficulty in exhibiting such normal caution where Marx is con-



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cerned is that it is not immediately apparent what interpretation could be given to his theoretical statements which would also account for his workaday descriptions. If the mode of production is said to determine the character and development of other social factors, each of which is regarded as mutually exclusive, then the self-generation of the former and the automatic response to its changes by the latter follow naturally.

What remains to be shown, however, is that Marx treats the components in the initial equation as mutually exclusive. This is the unsupported premise on which the entire logical structure of the interpretation of Marxism as Fundamentalism stands. Rather, all the evidence is that Marx manipulates the size of his factors, alters his classificational boundaries, to suit his changing purposes. An extreme instance of this, which starkly sets out the dimensions of our problem, is his claim that 'religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc.' are 'particular modes of production'.<sup>20</sup> What is left of the Fundamentalist interpretation in the wake of this assertion? And though Engels admits that Marx's definitions are never fixed, this practise, as I have indicated, is generally cited in criticism. That Marx had to obtain consistent, mutually exclusive categories is simply taken for granted.

In most cases, this aim is taken for granted because of the philosophical assumption, made explicit by Acton, that if there is no means of separating out social factors which interact there is no way of testing the validity of a theory which holds that one of them is the 'prime causal agency'.<sup>21</sup> But, it is just what is meant by calling one factor 'primary', or 'basic' or 'determining' that is at question here, and we shall not be able to arrive at a satisfactory answer until we grasp why Marx *did not* clearly separate out his social factors.

Acton has simply turned the real problem around, using what is in effect an ordinary language interpretation of 'primary' to impose upon Marx a common sense conception of social reality. He is saying, 'Given Marx understands "primary" in this way [Acton's way], he must group social phenomena into easily separable units in order that one (or one set of them) can be held to be primary.' If this is Marx's basic conception, then the Fundamentalist interpretation of his theories is correct and all the criticism based on it is valid. However, Marx's 'ambiguous' practise has made an ordi-

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nary language interpretation of his key expressions, at the least, highly dubious, and suggests that until we understand his conception of social reality and, consequently, what he could be saying, we shall not be able to comprehend clearly what he is, in fact, saying.

The problem is more serious still. For if Marx often uses the same expression to refer to what we would consider different things and, as he often does, different expressions for what we think of as the same thing, how can we grasp what it is he is referring to on *any* occasion without knowing what lies behind this practise?<sup>22</sup> Preferring to interpret Marx's theories in the light of how he used them, the task is to discover how he could take such liberties not only with the generally accepted classificational boundaries of his subject matter, but with the boundaries he himself seemed to lay down on various occasions. I wish to understand Marx with the aid of his voluminous writings, and not in spite of them. With this declaration of intent, let us return to the original formulation of the problem: Marx's words are like bats. They have meanings, according to Engels, which are not only new and unusual but also inconsistent. This was said to result from viewing 'things and their relations . . . not as fixed but as changing'. It is this conception which made it impossible for him to operate with mutually exclusive social factors. What, then, is this conception?